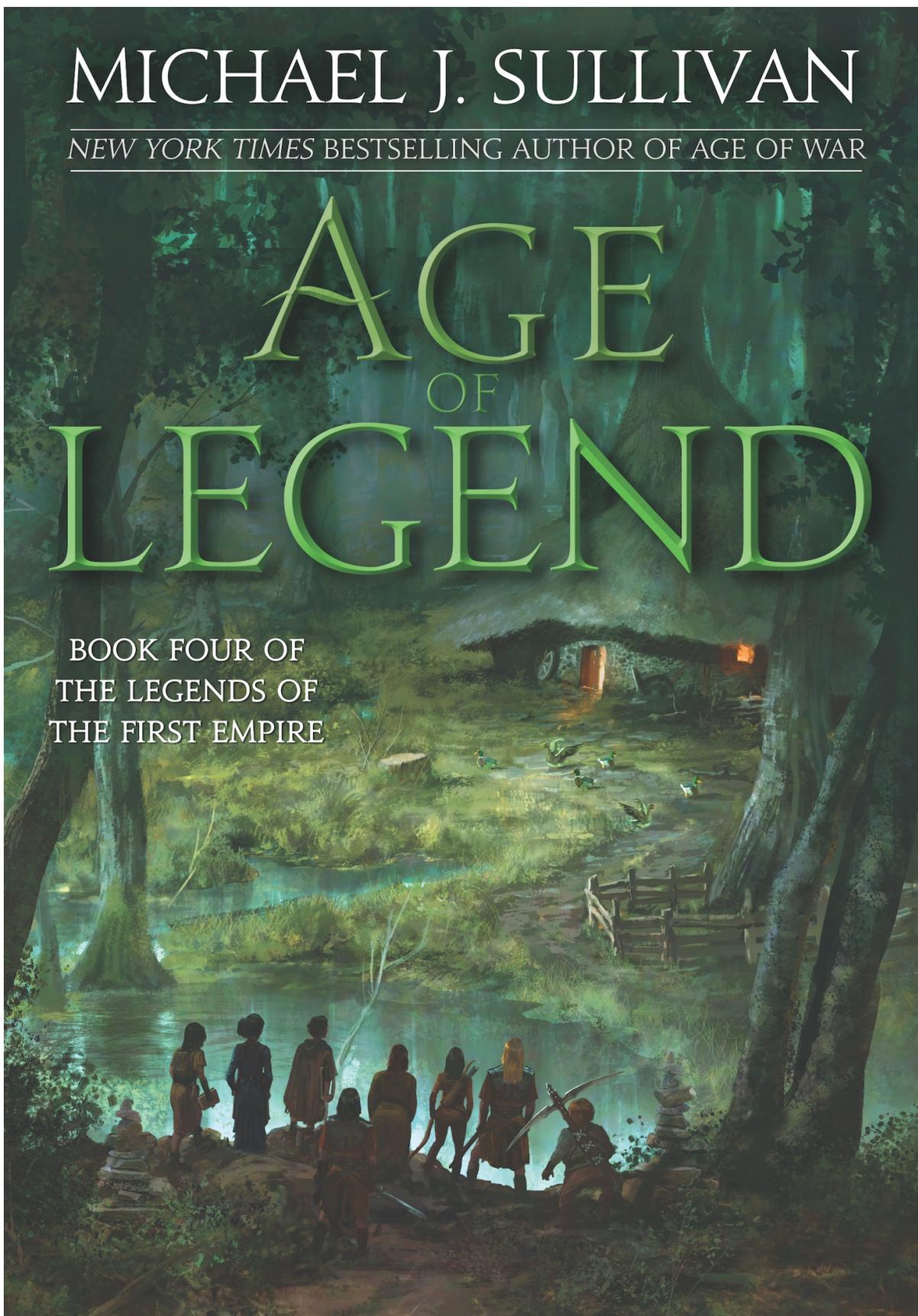


MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF AGE OF WAR

AGE OF LEGEND

BOOK FOUR OF
THE LEGENDS OF
THE FIRST EMPIRE



AGE of LEGEND

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

Legends of the First Empire: Book #4

Sample Chapter

ABOUT THE BOOK

**EACH CULTURE HAS THEIR OWN MYTHS AND LEGENDS,
BUT ONLY ONE IS SHARED, AND IT IS FEARED BY ALL.**

With *Age of Myth*, *Age of Swords*, and *Age of War*, fantasy master Michael J. Sullivan riveted readers with a tale of unlikely heroes locked in a desperate battle to save mankind. After years of warfare, humanity has gained the upper hand and has pushed the Fhrey to the edge of their homeland—but no farther. Now comes the pivotal moment. Persephone's plan to use the stalemate to seek peace is destroyed by an unexpected betrayal that threatens to hand victory to the Fhrey and leaves a dear friend in peril. Humanity's only hope lies in the legend of a witch, a forgotten song, and a simple garden door.

PRAISE FOR SULLIVAN'S WORK

“Riyria has everything you could possibly wish for: the characters are some of the best I’ve ever encountered in fantasy literature, the writing is top notch, and the plotting is so tight you’d be hard-pressed to find a mouse hole in it.” — *B&N Sci-fi & Fantasy Blog*

“This epic fantasy showcases the arrival of a master storyteller.” — *Library Journal on Theft of Swords*

“A delightful, entertaining and page-turning read that reminds us just how enjoyable, and how good The Riyria Revelations series is. A must-buy for all fantasy lovers.” — *The Founding Fields on Rise of Empire*

“Heir of Novron is the conclusion to the Riyria Revelations, cementing it in a position as a new classic of modern fantasy: traditional in setting, but extremely unconventional in, well, everything else.” — *Drying Ink on Heir of Novron*

“Snappy banter, desperate stakes, pulse pounding sword play, and good old fashioned heroics are all on full display here.” — *52 Book Reviews on The Crown Tower*

“With less gore and a smaller cast of characters than George R.R. Martin’s “Song of Ice & Fire” but equally satisfying, Sullivan’s epic fantasy will be gaining fans at exponential rates.” — *Library Journal on The Rose and the Thorn*

“Age of Myth bears the hallmark storytelling genius that we have all come to love of Michael’s work. It’s fast-paced, intimate, and beautifully cultivated.” — *Fantasy Book Review on Age of Myth*

“Sullivan’s ability to craft an engaging and captivating fantasy world surpasses most any other fantasy author out there, and puts him alongside names like Sanderson and Jordan.” — *Fantasy Book Review on Age of Swords*

WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

NOVELS

The Legends of the First Empire

Age of Myth • Age of Swords • Age of War • Age of Legend
Forthcoming: *Age of Death • Age of Empyre*

The Rise and the Fall (forthcoming)

Arrow of Death • Farilane • Untitled

The Riyria Revelations (completed)

Theft of Swords (contains *The Crown Conspiracy* and *Avempartha*)
Rise of Empire (contains *Nyphron Rising* and *The Emerald Storm*)
Heir of Novron (contains *Wintertide* and *Percepliquis*)

The Riyria Chronicles

The Crown Tower • The Rose and the Thorn • The Death of Dulgath
The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter
Blood of Thieves (contains *The Crown Tower* and *The Rose and the Thorn*)

Standalone Novels

Hollow World

ANTHOLOGIES

Unfettered: The Jester (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
Unfettered II: Little Wren and the Big Forest (Fantasy: Legends of the First Empire)
Unbound: The Game (Urban Fantasy)
Blackguards: Professional Integrity (Fantasy: The Riyria Chronicles)
The End: Visions of the Apocalypse: Burning Alexandria (Dystopian Science Fiction)
Triumph Over Tragedy: Traditions (Fantasy: Tales from Elan)
The Fantasy Faction Anthology: Autumn Mists (Fantasy: Contemporary)
Help Fund My Robot Army: Be Careful What You Wish For (Fantasy)

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To contact Michael, email him at michael.sullivan.dc@gmail.com

CHAPTER TWO

EXODUS

In the beginning, our clans were nomads. Then we settled in dabls, and for generations we did not move. The war made wanderers of us once again. — THE BOOK OF BRIN

Persephone insisted she'd be able to walk, but Moya declared that wasn't going to happen. The keenig's Shield spoke with both hands on her hips, reinforcing her seriousness with the same glare she had used on Udgar just before putting an arrow through his throat. For such a beautiful woman, Moya could be as scary as the Tetlin Witch.

"I've ordered a wagon for you," Moya said as if this would make any further debate pointless.

"Everyone else is walking. I can't ride in a cart like some privileged—"

"Seph, you can't walk. It's been less than a week since you were gutted. You can barely stand up straight, and you're still as pale as a goose egg. You'll be lucky to get down to the gate without help." Moya sighed and softened. "I know you're all about image and putting up a good front, but imagine how it will look if everyone sees you fall on your face. You're the keenig, our fearless leader. Let's not ruin everyone's screwed-up fantasy by giving the dirt a big kiss. Besides, it's a nice wagon. I

picked it out myself and arranged for everything. There are plenty of pillows and blankets, plus wine, cheese, a girl to hold your cup and wipe your brow, a boy to fan you, a piper to play music, and two muscular, handsome, shirtless men who will stand on either side. Not only will they protect you from harm but also from the sun as they hold a canopy to provide shade as you roll along in style.”

Persephone looked at her, horrified.

“I’m joking. Relax. By Mari, when did you lose your sense of humor?”

Persephone knew exactly when, and Moya would have, too, if she’d thought about it. But she didn’t. Everyone was doing their best not to think, ponder, or reflect—plenty of time for that later. For now, they kept busy: working, digging, gathering, packing, moving, always moving. The horror of the battle remained fresh; stopping would give their sorrows the opportunity to catch up. As long as everyone had something to do, they could delay facing the loss of their homes and loved ones and pretend life could continue like any ordinary day. Well, maybe not ordinary, but close enough.

Confined to her bed, Persephone had no such luxury. All she could do was reflect on mistakes made, lives lost, and her mountain of regrets.

Moya tapped a finger against her lips. “Although now that I think about it”—a wicked smile rose—“the part about men holding a canopy is kind of tempting. I wish I *had* arranged for that.” Focusing her glare once more on Persephone, Moya added a pointed finger. “But I’m serious about you traveling in a wagon.”

Persephone had been sequestered in what she assumed to be the best remaining room in the once-upon-a-time fortress that, after three days of battle, had become a devastated ruin. Moya insisted on the finest accommodations possible for her wounded keening. As Persephone lay in one of the tiny prison cells beneath the imploded Verenthenon, she knew the destruction of Alon Rhist was all but total.

Hastily cleaned and decorated with drapes, the room was so small there wasn't room for anything except the bed, which forced Moya to stand in the hallway. For several days, the labyrinthine warren of prison cells known as the *duryngon* had served as living quarters and administrative center of the Forces of the West. Persephone had invented the name out of necessity. She couldn't refer to those she led as the Ten Clans or the Rhune Horde because that would leave out their Fhrey allies and the three dwarfs. Besides, *Forces of the West* had the benefit of sounding powerful and inclusive.

"How are things coming?" Persephone asked.

"Fine," Moya said, but Persephone wondered how much of that one-word report was born of not wanting to add to her stress. Perhaps sensing that her keenig expected more, Moya added, "Where are we going anyway?"

"Merredydd, I suspect, but I'll need to speak to Nyphron first. I've only visited Alon Rhist, and I don't know which of the other Fhrey fortresses might suit our needs best. I'm told Merredydd is closest, but can it support all of us? Alon Rhist was the primary Instarya fortress, so I'm assuming it was the biggest, but with all the added Gula, even it would be too small. If no other outposts can handle the army, Rhen might be a better option."

"No walls left in Rhen," Moya pointed out. "Not anymore."

"Not at the moment, but we can rebuild."

"Do we have that kind of time? And how good will wooden walls be?"

"I was thinking Frost, Flood, and Suri could assist with that."

"Suri doesn't like walls."

"True, but I think she'll help just the same. The important thing is that Rhen isn't too far, and it has plenty of room, wood, water, game in the forest, and cultivated fields. Who knows what we'll find at the other Instarya settlements."

“Shouldn’t we just stay here? Can’t Suri put everything back the way it was?”

“I doubt it. I don’t know how the Art works, but I’m certain it’s easier to destroy than to rebuild. Would you know where every rock and splinter goes? Do you think she does? I suppose she could do something: clear the rubble, put up new walls perhaps, but if we’re going to that much effort, we might as well start fresh somewhere else—some place that doesn’t have corpses for a foundation. No, we can’t stay here. I want to get moving the moment Nyphron gets back.”

Moya’s brows rose. “He returned yesterday.”

“He did?”

Moya made a sour face. “Doesn’t bode well, does it? Your not knowing, I mean.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard you two are getting married.” Moya cringed, as if expecting a slap.

“Where did you hear that?” Persephone asked, shocked.

“Nyphron.” Moya looked a little confused. “He made it sound like it’s something you two have been discussing.”

“We’ve been *talking*, sure, for about a year, but I haven’t said yes.”

“Oh, well, I can see why. He comes back from the front and doesn’t even stop by to say hello? If Tekchin did that, I’d—”

“How’s that going?” Persephone wanted to change the subject, avoid talk of marriage, but given that she was contemplating a similar arrangement with Nyphron, she was genuinely curious.

“What? Tekchin and me?”

Persephone nodded. As far as she knew, Moya and Tekchin were the only Rhune–Fhrey pairing in history. On one hand, it made no sense that an arrogant, nine-hundred-year-old Fhrey warrior would find a twenty-six-year-old Rhune mate-worthy, but in other ways, it was perfectly logical. They were both wild things, passionate, aggressive, and competitive. The two were exactly

the same—reflections born in different realities. As unlikely as it seemed, they somehow fit each other perfectly.

In many ways, Persephone saw a similarity between their affair and her relationship with Nyphron. They both saw themselves as leaders first and individuals second. They focused on the roles they played in shaping the future rather than any personal comfort or desires. Even the fact that he hadn't visited her right away made sense. Upon returning, Nyphron's priority would be hearing reports from the defense forces he'd left behind, not checking up on her.

A Rhune fiancé might have rushed to her out of an emotional desire, a need to reassure himself she was safe. Such sentimentality would take unwarranted hold of his judgment. There was no reason to fear for her wellbeing. She was adequately protected, and any concerns he might have would be immature and irrational compared to the many real concerns left in the wake of such a devastating battle. Nyphron was neither childish nor illogical.

What Persephone wanted to know from Moya was whether a relationship between Fhrey and humans could work. *Is such a pairing plausible?*

"We're good." Moya effortlessly rolled her shoulders. Then she paused and narrowed her eyes. A new smile appeared on her lips, this one taking on a self-satisfied expression. "Are you asking about how we—"

"By the Grand Mother, no!" Persephone threw up both hands, warding her off.

Moya's grin only grew more mischievous. "I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to discover that Fhrey are even more—"

"Stop! Stop it! I don't want to know anything about *that*. I was just thinking, well, it's a completely different culture. I was only curious if ah . . . ah . . ."

Moya folded her arms and watched in amusement as Persephone struggled.

"I mean Fhrey women are so . . . you know."

“Boring?” Moya supplied. “That’s what they are, you know? Or at least that is how the Fhrey see them.”

“I actually meant—”

“No, seriously. Tekchin says it all the time. Sure, Fhrey women are gorgeous, but they’re also dull. We lowly Rhunes have short lives, so we don’t have time to be tedious. I know I don’t. And to me, Tekchin is so much more than a man, *especially* in bed. He’s . . . he’s ah . . . well, he really is sort of like a god—and don’t you ever tell him I said that.”

Moya looked so suddenly concerned that Persephone found herself smiling. She realized it was the first time since—

“You’re going to marry Nyphron, aren’t you?” Now it was Moya’s turn to change the subject, and suddenly their conversation felt like a game of Truth or Dare.

“Yes, I suppose, as soon as we get settled again.”

“Wonderful.” Nyphron’s voice echoed from down the corridor.

“Shush.” Persephone put a hand to her lips. A moment later the Galantian leader appeared in the threshold, sidling up to Moya who inched over to share the doorway.

“How much did your Fhrey ears hear?” Persephone asked, concerned.

Nyphron grinned. “Enough to know that Tekchin is godlike in bed. He’s gonna love that.”

Moya’s mouth dropped open, her eyes aghast. Nyphron gave her a moment to retort, but for once the keenig’s Shield said nothing.

“And”—Nyphron looked at Persephone—“that I’ll need to arrange a feast following the pitching of the new camp in the High Spear Valley. That’s how we do such things in Fhrey society. We publicly announce our association, and then the attendees eat and drink themselves stupid.”

“Our *association*?”

“Association, marriage, same thing.”

Persephone looked at Moya, appalled. “See what I have to put up with?”

“Tekchin is worse. He won’t have a ceremony and refuses to say he loves me. He’s always going on about how actions are more important than words.”

“And for once he’s right,” Nyphron declared. “Pronouncements are a foolish frivolity. But in this case, a public display is unavoidable.”

“How come?” Moya asked.

“Politics,” Nyphron stated. “She’s the keenig, and I’m commander of the Instarya, so it’s important for everyone to witness our joining. The people need to *see* the two of us as a unified team and *hear* our pledges to each other and the cause.”

“Romantic, isn’t he?” Persephone said.

Despite his keen ears, Nyphron didn’t seem to hear that. He hooked a thumb back over his shoulder. “I noticed a number of carts being lashed to horses outside. What’s that all about?”

Persephone wanted to think he’d switched subjects because the talk of romance had made him uncomfortable, but Nyphron was never uneasy. He was merely his usual, focused self and had spent enough time on small talk.

“Roan had an idea of having a horse pull them,” Persephone replied. “A single animal can haul heavier loads than a team of men.”

“Will horses do that? My experience is that horses are skittish things, stupid animals that are best to be avoided. Won’t they end up kicking the cart? They’ll probably bust it and break a leg in the process.”

“Roan and Gifford have been working with the animals that survived. I heard they’re having good results.” She looked to Moya. “Isn’t that so?”

“They had a little trouble at first, but they’ve worked things out. Oh, I forgot to tell you.” Moya’s face lit up with excitement. “Gifford took me for a ride yesterday in this little two-wheeled

cart Roan and the dwarfs built. He hooked it up to Naraspur and, Sweet Mari, we flew across that plain so fast my eyes watered. We chased a group of deer! If I'd had Audrey with me, we could've filled the storehouse."

"Really?" Nyphron appeared intrigued. "You think you could down a deer with your bow while riding in a cart?"

"I can shoot anything, anywhere." Moya smiled at him. Now was her turn to wait for a retort, but just as before, none came. Maybe the two were figuring out ways to coexist.

"Moya, I need to speak to Nyphron privately. Can you go spread the word that we'll be leaving soon?"

"As you wish, *Madam Keenig*." Moya smiled and bowed to Persephone, who rolled her eyes in response as her Shield retreated.

Nyphron stared after her. If he were anyone else, Persephone might think he was appraising the view, but Nyphron's mind was working on something, and it had nothing to do with watching Moya walk away.

"So, what happened?" Persephone asked.

It took a moment before he responded. "Hmm? Sorry, what?"

"The fane? What happened when you caught up to him?"

Nyphron ran a hand through his helmet-crushed hair. "Oh, that. We didn't. The troops he left behind offered little resistance but provided enough time for the fane to escape. To be honest, I hadn't planned for such a significant victory. For him to be routed like that . . ." He shook his head. "I left soldiers in the High Spear Valley, and we'll consolidate all our forces there for the next stage."

"And what will that be?"

"Preparing for the advance. The Gula came the moment they saw the signal fires, and most didn't pack so much as a blanket. It'll take months to organize a supply chain capable of supporting

our combined forces as we shift to an offensive stance, and by the time it's in place, winter will arrive, and that's no time for war. If we do this right, we can take the fight to Lothian by next spring. By then, we ought to be in good shape."

"Shouldn't we get behind walls? Isn't that why we came to Alon Rhist in the first place?"

He clapped the stone of the cell. "The old girl served her purpose, but beyond all reason, the tide has turned, and now *we* are the hunters. The fane is the one who needs to hide in a fortress. Now comes the time for us to press forward and bring the fight to him. That's why we're moving up to the High Spear."

"Isn't being in the open dangerous?"

"No. The fane can't mount an assault no matter where we are. He has lost most of his warriors and has only a few remaining Miralyith. And the best news is that it'll take more than three seasons to significantly improve his situation. We, on the other hand, have more than enough men and will be well supplied and well-armed by then. The war will likely be over by this time next year."

"I've been thinking about that . . . about the end of the war, I mean. You said yourself that we did exceptionally well. And the fane ran, didn't he? He must be scared, right?"

"Terrified is the word I'd use. He knows his remaining days are few."

"Agreed." She nodded. "So, wouldn't that make him receptive to a peace treaty?"

Nyphron laughed. "A what?"

"It's something Arion once said. She thought if we could prove ourselves to be capable . . . if the other Fhrey understood we aren't mindless animals, we could win their respect and learn to coexist. During the attack, when I thought we'd lost, I sent a message about peace talks. I haven't heard back but—"

"You did what? How?"

"I sent a bird to Estramnadon. I knew the fane wasn't there, but if he made it back,

especially after seeing how we held our own, it might open a door. And now, our position is even stronger. We've made him run, and he'll—"

"You are right about that. We've beaten the fane. He's running to Erivan with his tail between his legs. He's got nothing. But you're wrong about negotiating; we don't have to. We've won. What's the point in talking? We have no reason to grant concessions and settle for compromises. All we have to do is march across the Nidwalden and set fire to the Forest Throne. I plan to execute Lothian in his arena with a full audience in attendance. That's what we're going to do. Conquering armies don't negotiate. Peace is what we'll have when Lothian and all his Miralyith are dead."

Persephone shouldn't have been shocked. Nyphron was a warrior, and violent men like him saw things in simple terms. "Kill them so they can't kill you," was the creed they followed. He was espousing a concept difficult to deny, fueled by cruelty, and fraught with unforeseen consequences. Persephone had learned that making friends of enemies was a far superior approach to a campaign of scorched earth. "But we don't need to kill—"

"Yes. We do. Trust me. I know Lothian. Do you think the fane will pardon me after the part I've played? I wouldn't. I know what's in his heart and mind because he and I are alike when it comes to those who have wronged us. If we let him live, we'll regret it."

"But Arion wanted both our peoples to—"

"Arion is dead."

The way he said it, so cold and unfeeling, silenced her. She wasn't yet up for a major battle. Moya was right about Persephone's lingering wounds; they still hurt, and in more ways than just her physical lacerations. Nyphron was moving to a posture of preparation, so there would be a suspension in the fighting. There was time to bring him around. "I'm sorry, you're right. We have a lot to do, and it's best to focus on the preparations for the move."

“Good.” He straightened and looked once more down the corridor in the direction Moya had headed. “Do you think she was telling the truth about using a bow while riding in a horse-drawn cart?”

“I thought you were starting to understand Moya. That woman has only a vague notion of what shame is, and she doesn’t need words to manipulate men. She’s not one to exaggerate.”

“Fascinating.” Nyphron nodded, once more lost in thought.

“What?”

“I’m remembering that wagon with your stone god rolling down the hill and crashing through the gate of Dhal Tirre. It crushed everyone and everything in its path.”

“Don’t remind me. Lately, I feel as if I’m—”

“Excuse me,” Nyphron said, and with that, he left her alone.

“I’m glad to see you, too, dear,” she muttered while listening to his footfalls fade away.